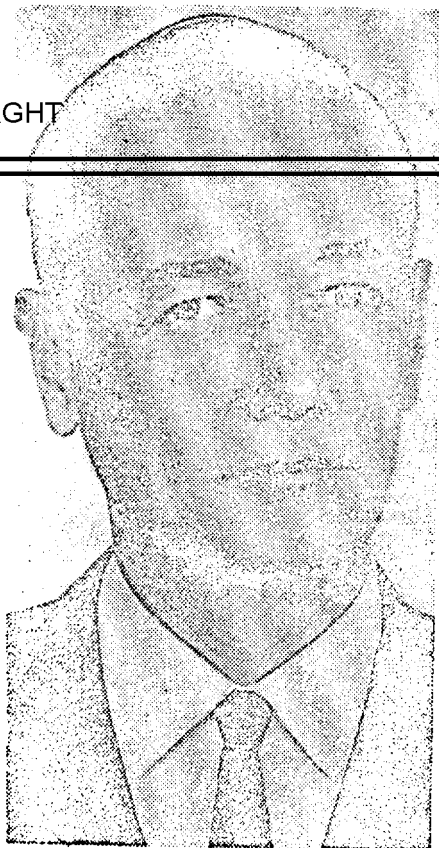


MAR 27 1966

# U.S. Negotiating To Free Hertz, Vietcong Captive

CPYRGHT

CPYRGHT



GUSTAV C. HERTZ

... U.S. seeks his release

## Critical Stage Reached In Talks on AID Official

By Richard Harwood

Washington Post Staff Writer

Secret negotiations are under way between the United States and the Vietcong for the release of a captive American government official, Gustav C. Hertz.

The negotiations, which have now reached a critical stage, have been conducted for months through a variety of channels. If an agreement is reached, it will end a 14-month ordeal for Hertz, a high-ranking Agency for International Development official from Leesburg, Va., and will climax one of the most fascinating and convoluted undercover negotiations of modern diplomacy.

The desperate, quiet effort to free him has involved since last summer the personal intervention of a U.S. Senator (Robert Kennedy), a fruitless ransom effort by the Central Intelligence Agency, the political fortunes of a North African nationalist leader, the intercession of private critics of American policy in Vietnam, and the stability of the Saigon government.

Continued

CPYRGHT

CPYRGHT

Always in the background, with the highest stakes in the affair, were two helpless men who had never met — Hertz and the man offered in exchange for his release, a Vietcong terrorist named Nguyen Van Hai, who was arrested in Saigon in March, 1965, for participation in the bombing of the American Embassy.

The story began early on Feb. 2 of last year. Hertz, a popular AID administrator with a fondness for practical jokes, went cycling one afternoon in the suburbs of Saigon. He left behind a gentle and deeply religious wife, and five children, one of whom was studying for the priesthood back home in the United States.

Hertz never returned from that ride and two months were to pass before the Vietcong confirmed what was widely believed. He had become, as a captive, a civilian pawn in a curious war. His life hung in the balance of events he could not control.

On April 7, the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong, broadcast a communique from Hanoi announcing that Hertz was in custody and would be executed if the terrorist Hai were put to death by the government of South Vietnam.

Two days later, Hai was sentenced to death but that sentence was not to be carried out. The South Vietnamese spared his life.

By that time, the Hertz family had returned to its home in Leesburg where Mrs. Hertz shunned all publicity and all comment except for one request: "Please be prayerful." Nearby was the family of her brother-in-law, A. Burke Hertz, an Alexandria lawyer.

Weeks passed with no sign that his captor intended to let him go.

#### Kennedy's Help Sought

At this point Sen. Kennedy was approached by representatives of the Hertz family. They thought he might, in some way, be able to help.

On the advice of friends, Kennedy decided that an approach to the Vietcong through Algerian government officials might be fruitful. The NLF had representatives in Algiers who were in regular contact with the Algerian government.

Kennedy broached the idea to the White House where the unofficial response was favorable.

Shortly thereafter the Senator met secretly with Algerian Ambassador Cherif Guclal, who, promised to personally take up the matter with President Ben Bella.

#### Ben Bella Overthrown

Ben Bella, an admirer of the late President Kennedy, was receptive to playing the role of intermediary and raised the subject with the NLF representatives. But before serious negotiations could begin, Ben Bella was overthrown in a military coup on June 19.

For the next several weeks, there was uncertainty as to whether the new government of President Houari Boumedienne would be willing to continue the effort on behalf of Hertz. Early in August, Ambassador Guclal brought the matter to Boumedienne's attention and the President agreed to take up where Ben Bella had left off.

The initial results were encouraging. The Algerians reported that the Vietcong were willing to exchange Hertz for the terrorist Hai who remained in custody in Saigon.

#### High-Level Discussion

This proposal was taken to the highest councils of the American Government. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, a former Ambassador to South Vietnam who was serving as a consultant to the President, reportedly opposed an exchange on the terms being discussed in Algiers.

It was argued that the United States had no control over prisoners of the Saigon government and, therefore, could make no valid exchange offer. It was further argued that the release of the terrorist at U.S. insistence might af-

fect the political stability of the Saigon regime.

An alternative plan was proposed, involving a broader exchange of perhaps a dozen prisoners on each side, including Hertz. But nothing came of this alternative.

The next development had the flavor of a spy novel. From sources in Saigon came word that it might be possible to secure Hertz' release through a ransom arrangement. And under the direction of the CIA, a ransom attempt was actually made.

A large sum of money—reportedly \$20,000—was turned over to go-betweens in Saigon, but Hertz was not released.

Two explanations have been offered. The first was that the ransom offer was fraudulent. The second was that at the last minute the Vietcong turned down the offer. What happened to the money is still uncertain, although reports have it that at least part of it has been recovered.

The failure of all these efforts was discouraging. However, the undertaking was not abandoned.

#### SANE Official's Role

In September, it was suggested that Sanford Gottlieb of Bethesda, political action director of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), might be in a position to make contact with the NLF representatives in Algiers.

Although Gottlieb has declined to confirm any part in the Hertz affair, it is understood that he communicated by letter with contacts in Algiers and received a favorable response. He was informed, it is reported, that the

Vietcong were again willing to exchange Hertz for the terrorist Hai, that they had so informed the South Vietnamese, but had received no reply.

Shortly thereafter, a new communication arrived through private channels from Algiers to the effect that the Hertz-Hai exchange could be made if it were done "in a certain way." This was interpreted to mean that Sen. Kennedy was to have a personal role in the release, and that possibly he was expected to go to Algiers to accept custody of Hertz.

But, again, nothing came of it.

#### New Approaches Tried

All through the winter, representatives of the Hertz family here remained in contact with U.S. officials. Several new proposals were considered and several new approaches were tried, including a private approach to the South Vietnamese Embassy here. The South Vietnamese responded, it is said, with an offer to cooperate in any way possible.

What subsequently occurred was a renewal of the original offer—Hertz for Hai—and it is this offer that is the basis of the secret negotiations now under way.

Will they bear fruit? From the best information available, no inkling of the Vietcong attitude has recently been received, and on the basis of past failures and frustration there is no undue optimism here. There is hope, however, that an early response will be received.

Hertz has not been seen for months but the assumption is that he is alive and well.